

THE MEDIA BUSINESS

Some Self-Publishers Don't Perish

By ESTHER B. FEIN

Craig I. Zirbel is the author of "The Texas Connection: The Assassination of John F. Kennedy." He is also the editor of "The Texas Connection." And the marketing manager. And the proofreader. And the subsidiary-rights director.

Mr. Zirbel has every reason to be pleased with the work of Mr. Zirbel. His book has been on The New York Times best-seller list of hardcover nonfiction for eight weeks and currently is at No. 11. That is good news for the publisher — who is Mr. Zirbel.

Unable to find a commercial publisher interested in his book, Mr. Zirbel decided to publish it himself.

Examples of Success

The history of American publishing is rich with examples of do-it-yourself successes. At Cornell University in 1918, a young man named E. B. White learned the rudiments of English usage and prose from "The Elements of Style," a manual self-published by his professor, William Strunk Jr. Many years later, Mr. White revised the manual and turned it into a perennial college best seller for Macmillan.

One of the sensations of modern publishing was "What Color is Your Parachute," a guidebook to careers written and first produced in the 1970's by an Episcopal clergyman, Richard Nelson Bolle. The book, which eventually sold more than 2.5 million copies, was later acquired by Ten Speed Press.

Every year, thousands of authors buck the publishing establishment and put books out on their own. There are no statistics on self-publishing, but people in the industry say that as large houses have begun to cut down the number of titles they publish, spurned authors are taking the publishing reins into their own hands.

And unlike vanity presses, which charge writers a fee to publish books that are usually distributed privately, these self-publishers aim to sell their books in the marketplace.

Few books, published either by the authors themselves or by big houses, achieve the level of success that Mr. Zirbil's book has. (There currently is, however, another self-published book on the Times best-seller list, "How to Satisfy a Woman Every Time" by Naura Hayden, which is No. 5 in the hardcover Advice, How-to and Miscellaneous category.) But while they

A few authors just print their own best sellers.

rarely make national best-seller lists, some self-published books do well in regional or specialty markets.

Most authors who self-publish are passionate, even crusading, about their books. They have religious theories, diet theories, self-help programs, dog-training programs, laundry tips, dating tips, recipes and all manner of advice that they are sure will change your life.

Steven W. Little, senior vice president of buying and merchandising for the Ingram Book Company, one of the biggest book wholesalers, said it received up to 100 self-published submissions a day. Some are very good, he added. But after evaluating the sales potential, Ingram agrees to stock relatively few self-published titles, a decision that rejected writers often do not take very well.

"Usually, they have 2,000 copies in their garage," he said. "It's very personal for them and it's hard to explain

the realities of the business. It's like their mission."

Mr. Zirbel has been a Kennedy assassination-conspiracy devotee since childhood. After he had plowed through hundreds of books and articles, saw the documentaries, visited the sites and examined pictures, he came up with his theory — that then-Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson had the most to gain from the death of President John F. Kennedy and was involved in the 1963 assassination.

"This has been my life's project, an obsession," said Mr. Zirbil, a 37-year-old lawyer in Scottsdale, Ariz. "And when all this information about Oliver Stone and his movie about J.F.K. started coming out, I figured his movie could end up supporting any theory. I didn't want to come out after him and look like I was copying him, so I had to rush my book out."

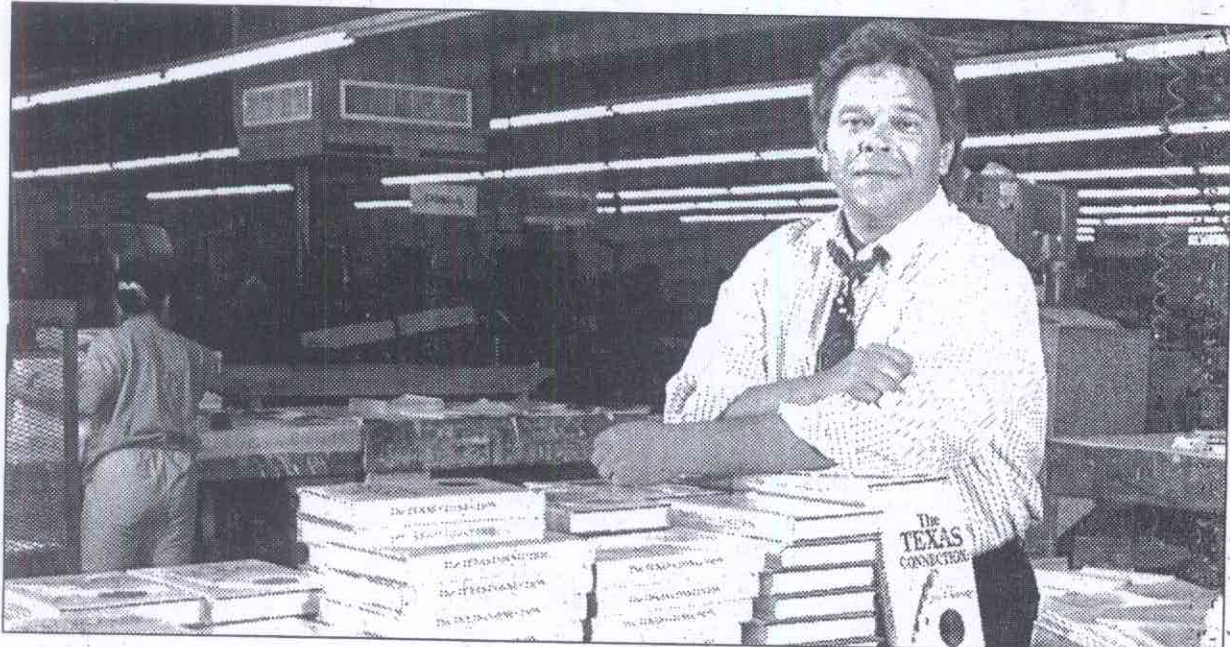
Effect of the Stone Film

Indeed, the attention that the film "J.F.K." focused on the Kennedy assassination helped to push "The Texas Connection" onto the best-seller lists, said Jack Perry, a nonfiction buyer for the Waldenbooks chain.

Starting out, Mr. Zirbil did what many self-published authors do: he mortgaged his house and dipped into his savings account. He expected the venture to cost about \$40,000. He was wrong. He now estimates that it cost more than twice that amount.

Though Mr. Zirbil learned the publishing business through trial and error, his book looks quite professional — at least in its second and subsequent printings. The first printing, he said, was riddled with errors.

There are companies that can help self-publishing writers through this obstacle course. For example, About Books of Buena Vista, Colo., will do everything from editing a manuscript to getting a book the bar code that enables distributors and stores to



Craig I. Zirbel, author-publisher of "The Texas Connection," at the Roswell Bookbinding plant in Arizona. Penny Ann Dolin for The New York Times

read the name and price of the book with a computerized scanner.

Marilyn Ross, who owns About Books with her husband, Tom, argues that self-publishing is often a good alternative for a writer who might get ignored by a big publisher.

"There are books that never see the best-seller lists that sell many more copies through direct mail, gift shops, sporting goods stores, premiums, '800' numbers," said Mrs. Ross, who along with her husband wrote "The Complete Guide to Self-Publishing" (Writer's Digest Books). "If you do it on your own, you can promote yourself a lot better."

But most self-publishing authors hope to attract a professional publisher. The Rev. Joseph F. Girzone, a retired Catholic priest in Albany, wrote and self-published in 1983 a book called "Joshua," in which he

imagined what would have happened had Jesus lived in modern times.

Father Girzone did everything from designing the cover to selling the book to packing cartons for shipping. The book became a regional sensation and Father Girzone actually began to make a small profit.

In 1987, when the book was sold to Collier Books, a division of Macmillan, Father Girzone was relieved. "After three years and 40,000 copies, I was pretty tired," he said.

But he said he never doubted his decision to self-publish. "I didn't have an option," he said. "I had to get the book out. I knew it would bring peace to people."

"Joshua" is still in print and has sold more than a million copies. So far, Macmillan has published a total of four books by Father Girzone, with a fifth scheduled for the fall.

"For a publisher like us to pick up a self-published book, basically someone in the house needs to fall in love with it," said Barry Lipmann, president of Macmillan's adult trade division. "That happens pretty rarely."

Mr. Zirbil said he already had another idea for a book. But he has no intention of publishing it himself.

Indeed, since his current book has been on the best-seller list for eight weeks, with 77,000 copies in print, he said, he is more in debt that when he started. Printers and binders want to be paid when the job is done, but most stores and distributors pay after 90 days or more, and any profits go right back into the next printing.

"What happened to me is one in a million," he said. "It's like I bought a lottery ticket and my number came up. But if I break even, I'll be happy. And lucky."